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Arizona recall group says Sheriff Arpaio 'hijacked' Republican Party

by Valeria Fernández by New America Media

Phoenix — Respect Arizona, a newly formed bipartisan political committee headed by Republican attorney William James Fisher, announced at a press conference Thursday in Phoenix that they have until May 30 to gather 335,317 signatures that would trigger a special election to recall controversial Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio.

Fisher argued that the negative publicity surrounding Arpaio's hard-line approach to immigration enforcement has damaged the Republican Party at a time when some of its politicians, among them Arizona Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake, are trying to engage in the national immigration reform debate.

"I believe people like Arpaio have hijacked our brand as Republicans," said Fisher in an interview with New America Media. "He's a liability to the party because he's hurting our brand, he's hurting what our party stands for. It's the party of Abraham Lincoln. We have to stop this hate."

It didn't take long for Arpaio himself to respond to Fisher's accusation.

"I believe this effort is underway because of my stance on enforcing all the laws of our state, including those pertaining to illegal immigration," said Arpaio in a prepared statement. He also said he had extended "an olive branch, even to those activists who have voiced such hate towards me."

"Still, if these people insist on a recall drive, I have faith in the people of Maricopa County. They know exactly what and who they want in office, and they won't be fooled by outside special interests," the statement read.

Arpaio, who fundraised more than \$8 million for his last election campaign (80 percent of that came from out of state), didn't wait long to send a letter asking his supporters to donate money again because of the recall attempt.

"You were such an important part of my victory last year even though we faced insurmountable odds. I certainly did not plan on this recall, but I have to ask you again for your support," reads Arpaio's letter. "The fight starts now. Over the next several months I am going to be bombarded with negative attacks and lies. I must have the necessary resources to defend my record and run a winning campaign."

Arpaio also said Respect Arizona has already raised more than \$1 million in funds for the recall, but the group said they have no significant donations at this time.

Chad Willems, Arpaio's campaign manager, asked Respect Arizona to reveal how much they have collected in donations and argued, "This group is going to cost the taxpayers of Maricopa County millions of dollars."

Supporters of the recall, like Lydia Guzman, director of Respect/Respeto, a group that has documented allegations of civil rights violations against Latinos by the sheriff's office, saw irony in Willems' statement.

"I think the taxpayers have had enough. They want a recall. It doesn't cost that much money to launch this recall, compared to what he has cost the county in lawsuits and his frivolous spending," she said.

Respect Arizona has already begun to collect signatures and gather more volunteers, though Parraz said the effort will require a combination of paid petition-gatherers and supporters.

Critics of the effort are skeptical of the campaign's prospects for success, in part because Arpaio was just recently re-elected to a sixth term. Supporters of the recall have countered that Arpaio won with only 50.7 percent of the vote -- his lowest margin in 20 years -- and that the election process was unfair in that the sheriff never had to answer to his critics during the campaign.

"The real chance wasn't given, Joe Arpaio didn't come out like he should have -- he should have come out and debated it. Instead, he spent millions of dollars in a campaign," said Fisher during a press conference Thursday.

The recall petition announcement coincides with the two-year anniversary of another recall. Citizens for a Better Arizona started a successful movement to oust SB 1070 architect, Sen. Russell Pearce, in 2011. Chad Snow and Randay Parraz, both founders of the group, are also supporting Respect Arizona in their effort to oust Arpaio.

The effort to recall Pearce didn't garner much attention from the media in the early days of the signature-gathering process. Neither did it capture the attention of Pearce himself, who had just been elected to his senate seat in 2010.

Back then, only 7,000 signatures were needed to trigger the recall -- a much smaller portion than what is required in Arpaio's case, because the Pearce re-election was taking place in a smaller district, in the city of Mesa.

"At the beginning of that effort there were many critics who said you'll never be able to get the signatures, you'll never be able to raise the money, we just had an election, you'll never find a candidate, and even if

you find a candidate it will never win in conservative Mesa," Snow said.

Parraz and Fisher said if a special election is held, voters would be given the rare opportunity to focus only on the sheriff's race, without the politics of a presidential or congressional election getting in the way.

"There's a lot of people in the community that are not aware of the things that Arpaio has done, they are not aware that he spent \$8.2 million to win the last election," Fisher said. "This is a chance to really have an opportunity to focus on the record of Sheriff Joe Arpaio."

Citizens for a Better Arizona and Respect Arizona highlighted during a press conference what they say are some of the scandals in which Arpaio has been involved, including death of prisoners in his jails, civil rights violations and mishandling of investigations.

Arpaio has also been criticized for his role in misspending \$100 million in taxpayer dollars from a jail tax fund that was used to conduct investigations on political enemies and on immigration enforcement rather than on jails.

Another scandal, one that drove many Republican voters away from Arpaio during the last election, involved the mishandling of investigations of more than 400 sexual crimes against children.

Arpaio was also the target of a five-year criminal investigation by the Department of Justice over alleged abuse of power, though that case was closed last year without any charges being filed. He remains the subject of two civil right lawsuits alleging racial profiling, one from the Department of Justice and another lead by the American Civil Liberties Union.

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